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R E P O R T

Officer Classification and the Future of Diversity Among Senior Military Leaders

A Case Study of the Army ROTC

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Summary

Throughout recent history, the U.S. military has served as a model for racial integration and has seen diversity flourish in its organization. Still, while the enlisted ranks of the U.S. military exhibit a high level of demographic diversity, the leadership of the military has remained demographically homogenous.

This report summarizes findings from an exploratory study of a potential barrier to improving demographic diversity in the senior officer ranks. We started with an observation that officers with combat-related career backgrounds, such as the Combat Arms branches of the U.S. Army, tend to populate the top levels of the Army. In 2006, for instance, 80 percent of Army generals were in Combat Arms branches. We also observed that minority officers are disproportionately absent in these key career fields.

This report touches on the career field assignment processes for all services and commission sources. We found that each military service (Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps) and commission source (Reserve Officers' Training Corps [ROTC], service academy, and officer training school/officer candidate school) has a distinct career field assignment process. However, because we had limited resources, we concentrated on the Army ROTC process as a detailed case study. As a case study, its results are not fully generalizable to other services or even to other commission sources within the Army. Our primary aims are to highlight the importance of the issue and to motivate the U.S. military to conduct a comprehensive study of the issue.

The Army ROTC Career Field Assignment Process

In this report, we look in detail at the Army ROTC classification process. As the first step in this process, the Army obtains career field preferences from ROTC cadets. Each cadet ranks his or her top choices of career fields, without restrictions on academic major or a qualifying test. The Army then combines these preference rankings with the cadet Order of Merit List (OML). The OML ranks cadets according to academic achievement, leadership, and physical fitness. The top 10 percent of the OML automatically receive their top preference. For the remaining 90 percent of cadets, the Army moves down the list and places each cadet in his or her first-choice career field until that field has reached its quota for the year. If a cadet's first choice is full, the Army assigns the second choice, then the third choice, and so forth, as the Army continues down the OML and career fields continue to fill up.

A few complications occur throughout the process. While the career assignment process for the top half of the OML is rigid, there is more flexibility in the lower half. In an attempt to distribute quality across career fields, the Army employs the *65 percent rule*. This rule allows

for no more than 65 percent of any one branch's entry-level requirements to be filled from the top half of the OML. Thus, cadets in the top half of the OML whose first choices are 65 percent full will receive the next feasible choice, while the remaining 35 percent of those career fields will go to cadets in the bottom half. This rule allows some lower-quality cadets to enter popular career fields.

In addition, cadets have the option to volunteer for the Branch for Service program, which extends their active duty service obligation (ADSO) by three years. After the first half of the OML list has been assigned, the Army gives those who volunteer for this program preference over those who do not. Finally, the active component Department of the Army Selection and Branching Board plays a role in assigning lower-quality cadets.

Consequences of Cadet Career Preference and Cadet Quality

As described above, there are two main factors in a cadet's career field assignment in the Army ROTC program: cadet career preferences, which are obtained directly, and cadet quality as measured by the OML. Our quantitative analysis examined how these factors affect minority representation across career fields. We used 2007 Army ROTC branching board results and concentrated on male cadets.¹

Our analysis showed that career field preferences do differ across racial/ethnic lines. For instance, African American cadets tend to prefer Combat Service Support branches whereas white cadets most often opt for Combat Arms branches.

Next, we determined that minorities tend to rank lower on the OML. In general, whites earned higher Order of Merit scores (OMS) (which determine a cadet's rank on the OML) than did minority cadets. While more than 10 percent of white cadets ranked in the top 10 percent of the OML in 2007, fewer than 3 percent of African Americans ranked as high on the list.

Finally, we examined whether cadets of different racial/ethnic groups were receiving their top career field preferences. When we compared cadets' ranked preferences with the career fields to which they were actually assigned, we found that, regardless of race/ethnicity or rank on the OML, most cadets received one of their top career field choices. Therefore, we concluded that racial and ethnic differences in career preferences largely explain the low number of minorities in the Combat Arms branches.

However, it is important to note that, even though we have shown that minorities tend to indicate preferences for different career fields than do whites, we do not know the reasons behind these preferences. For example, we do not know whether minority cadets actually like Combat Service Support branches or whether they adjust their branch choice according to how competitive they are. To examine this possibility, we looked at how the percentage of cadets who picked a Combat Arms branch varied with OMS. Hispanic and other race/ethnicity cadets appeared more likely to choose a Combat Arms branch as their competitiveness increased, but white and African American cadets showed no clear relationship between

¹ Our analysis concentrated on male cadets, for the following reasons: (1) Most Combat Arms positions are not open to female officers, so their career field selection process is not directly comparable. (2) Only 498 female cadets were observed in our data, making up less than 17 percent of the 2007 Army ROTC cohort. (3) Female cadets are not distributed evenly across racial/ethnic groups.

OMS quartile and propensity to opt for a Combat Arms branch as their top choice. This result suggests that there may be true differences in preferences across racial/ethnic groups that are not explained by individual competitiveness, although the limited statistical power of our small sample did not allow us to definitively address this question.

Policy Discussion and Recommendations

Although our analysis is merely a single case study, the results suggest a general policy recommendation for all services.

We recommend that DoD conduct a comprehensive study of its classification systems within all services and commission sources because we have shown that a lack of minorities in key career fields can be one of the major barriers in improving diversity among the top military leaders.

In addition, our findings imply that the Army has three options to improve the level of racial/ethnic diversity in the top officer ranks:

1. Promote more officers from Combat Support and Combat Service Support career fields.
2. Disproportionately promote minorities in the Combat Arms career fields.
3. Increase the number of minorities in Combat Arms.

The first option requires a fundamental change in the Army culture. The second option explicitly inserts race/ethnicity into the promotion process. The third option seems the most feasible, but the Army would need to adjust the incentives for choosing Combat Arms branches in a way that appeals to minorities.

Currently, the order of merit system does not appear to prevent minorities from entering their preferred career fields. If further research highlighted a policy option that could shift the preferences of minorities toward Combat Arms branches, such a policy might bring the problem of their lower OML rankings into play. If minorities began to prefer Combat Arms at rates similar to those of white cadets, they may no longer receive their top preferences, since white cadets (whose OML rankings tend to be higher) also prefer Combat Arms. In this case, the Army would need to modify the order of merit system to get more minorities into Combat Arms branches.

Although it is clear that certain aspects of support branches are more appealing to minority cadets than to white cadets, unless we can identify which incentives minorities respond to, we will be unable to increase the number of minorities who prefer the Combat Arms branches. And, as we pointed out above, we still need to understand the reasons behind minority cadets' career choices. A greater understanding of these reasons will allow us to craft more effective policies to increase the number of minorities in key career fields. Therefore, we strongly recommend that the Army conduct a comprehensive study of its classification system, including an analysis of cadets' career preferences.

The military cannot create general officers overnight. Many factors in addition to career field choice affect whether or not an officer can successfully reach the highest levels of leadership. There are no guarantees that simply shifting minorities into preferred career fields will

produce minority generals. Still, this report demonstrates that career field selection is one mechanism within the military that influences the long-run diversity of the senior leadership, and therefore, one that demands examination from policymakers.